Who Killed Phillip II?
By Grant Pope

A classic tale of revenge and deception, the case of who killed Phillip II has raged on for centuries. "Pausanias, a young Macedonian noble, suspected by no one, having waited at the entranceway, slew Philip as he was passing, and turned a day which would otherwise have been filled with the sounds of gladness into one with the sounds of grief" (Justin, Slide 4). The hand that held the spear, that of Pausanius, is clear, but there are dozens of theories as to who tempted him to carry out the assassination, as well as aided in the act and the attempted escape. There were many who could have wanted the death of the King including Darius III of Persia, Demosthenes, Attalus the General, Amyntas, Alexander the Lyncestrian, as well as the Macedonian Aristocracy. Although many of these people had motives, the blame clearly lies on those most close and dear to Phillip himself. The assassination of Phillip was devised and enacted by Olympias, Alexander and his royal bodyguards. A broken love avenged, a future kingship confirmed and a loyalty obeyed: this is their story.

Olympias, clearly a vengeful and powerful woman, plotted with her son against her ex-husband after he entices their anger and revenge. “337 spring Philip fell in love with and married Cleopatra...; he formally divorced Olympias at this time” (Plutarch, Slide 11). Olympias was a wife of one of the most powerful men in the Mediterranean area and was simply discarded once Phillip found a new, full-blooded Macedonian bride. Although Olympias was of royal blood in her own country of Epirus, the loss of the marriage connection to the powerful and influential nation of Macedonia was a terrible blow to Olympias’ power. She then became worried about her son’s future because
Phillip could very possibly sire a full-blooded Macedonian male heir that could take Alexander’s spot in the pecking order. Olympias was concerned regardless of Phillip’s continuous belief in Alexander’s abilities. Alexander and his bodyguards were also developing contempt towards Phillip through their own obsession with power. Alexander’s worry for power began when Attalus, Cleopatra’s uncle, made a point at the wedding of Phillip and Cleopatra to insult Alexander’s bloodline, infuriating Alexander who sought revenge on Attalus with his goblet of wine. “Philip lurched to his feet and drew his sword against his son,” showing Alexander that he may indeed need to worry about his place as heir to the throne when his own father would not support him against this other man (Plutarch, Slide 17). This night would have caused Alexander to completely rethink his attitude towards his own future reign as he fled the city with his diabolical mother, Olympias. His mother would have surely shared his sentiments and encouraged him to grasp the kingship that was rightfully his. Olympias fled to Epirus while Alexander sought refuge in Illyria. While in Epirus, Olympias asked her brother Alexander to wage war on Phillip, showing just how far she was willing to pursue revenge. This was halted however, by plans for “the wedding of Cleopatra, Phillip’s daughter, and Alexander, whom he made king of Epirus” (Justin, Slide 4). Alexander and his mother both clearly had motives to strike against Phillip.

The opportunity of the wedding as a place to assassinate Phillip, as well as the rape of Pausanias only strengthened the motives of Alexander and his mother to take action. It is evident that Olympias’ motives led her to take action and set up the assassination because “It is certain that Olympias had arranged to have horses waiting for the fleeing assassin” (Justin, Slide 12). Olympias, although in Epirus at the time, was
cunning enough to create an escape for Pausanius, even though the assassination was miles away, through the direct and efficient lines of communication between the two cities. “She was believed to have encouraged the young man [Pausanias] and incited him to take his revenge” on the King at one of his most vulnerable times (Plutarch, Slide 7). The evidence against Olympias only strengthens in the aftermath of the murder. While she clearly had motive as well as encouraged and aided the assassin in his endeavor, she made a spectacle of Phillip’s death in the days to come. Upon arriving in Macedonia, “she put a gold crown on the head of Pausanias who was still hanging publicly” for his crimes (Justin, Slide 21). She also made sure that sacrifices reserved only for a hero were performed for the dead murderer. Olympias made it very evident to the nobility and family of Phillip that she was overjoyed with the death of her ex-husband and although she never openly admitted her guilt, it obvious that she had a heavy hand in the assassination. She aided too by Alexander and his bodyguards. As time went on and plans began to hatch, Alexander would have gone to the men “Philip banished...Thessalus, Harpalus, Nearchus, Erygius and Ptolemy” as they were his loyal friends (Plutarch, Slide 25). Together, they could have worked with Olympias to ready the plans for the assassination as many of them still had strong connections and friendships with the men who were Phillip’s bodyguards at the time, including Pausanius. One example of Alexander goading the assassin on was when he quoted Euripides to Pausanias saying, “The father, bride, and bridegroom all at once” (Plutarch, Slide 7). Alexander was in a perfect position to seize power, but needed to be highly discrete with his involvement so that his ascension to the throne following the assassination would go without opposition. One instance he used to cover his own
involvement was when he “he showed his anger against Olympias for the horrible revenge which she took on Cleopatra during his absence” (Plutarch, Slide 7). Alexander could not sit idly by while his mother continued to shed the blood of his father’s family without raising suspicion to his alleged innocence. The involvement of Alexander was all too clear by the amount of connections between Pausanius, the get away horses and Olympias, who was “a woman of jealous and vindictive temper, who incited Alexander to oppose his father” (Plutarch, Slide 17).

Attalus and other conspirators too were believed to have a hand in the assassination, but previous events show their lack of involvement in the crime. To begin, Attalus had a horrible relationship with the assassin himself, Pausanius. Attalus in the past had invited Pausanius over, gotten him drunk and then had his way with him before handing “his unconscious body over to the muleteers to abuse in drunken licentiousness” (Diod, Slide 8). It would have been impossible for Attalus to convince Pausanius to kill Phillip because of the horrible acts Attalus had done to him. In addition, Pausanius to punish Attalus accordingly, and when Phillip refused, it would have only deepened the resentment and hatred of Attalus in Pausanius’ eyes. Also, at the wedding of Phillip and his niece Cleopatra, Attalus “called on the Macedonians to pray to the gods that the union of Philip and Cleopatra might bring forth a legitimate heir to the throne” (Plutarch, Slide 17). This speech, although it incited the rage of Alexander, shows that Attalus is confident in his future place in the court of Phillip as long as he retains blood ties to Cleopatra and his hopeful grandson and possible pureblooded heir to the throne. Attalus did not need to attempt to seize power because his own status as a General was almost equal to that of the King’s as he was allowed to
lead campaigns on his own. Finally, the aristocracy and nobility from other towns would not have to inner connections to infiltrate Phillip's bodyguards and create an elaborate assassination plot against the King. There is not enough evidence to show that men such as Darius, Demosthenes, Amyntas, Alexander the Lyncestrian, Parmenio or Antipater had enough incentive to kill Phillip because none of them would have been in a commanding position to seize power after his death. The direct line would have brought the throne to Alexander as long as he was free of guilt in the crime. Without a more defined motive from any of these gentlemen, their innocence must be accepted as fact.

Olympias, Alexander and Alexander’s bodyguards were behind the assassination of Phillip II. They were the most able to control and manipulate Pausanias to assassinate the King and in the best position to ready his escape. Olympias had the motives of revenge against her ex-husband as well as ensuring the advancement of her prized son in the hierarchy of the Macedonian ranks to king. Alexander, although reminded of his importance to Phillip, was fearful, like his mother, that his position as heir was in jeopardy and sought to secretly remove the one and only obstacle between him and the throne. The bodyguards were bound by loyalty to Alexander and his devious plot as well as a vengeful incentive against Phillip who banished them from their homeland. The story of the assassination clearly shows the development of the contempt towards Phillip followed by the perfect opportunity for the assassin to strike. The death of Phillip was a tragedy, but it allowed for Alexander to step forward and display to the world and history how a true king controls an empire.